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OO RUEHWEB

DE RUEHUL #4261/01 3480912
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
O 140912Z DEC 06
FM AMEMBASSY SEOUL
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 1902
INFO RUEHBJ/AMEMBASSY BEIJING 1728
RUEHMO/AMEMBASSY MOSCOW 7718
RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO 1827
RUEHUM/AMEMBASSY ULAANBAATAR 1420
RUEHBK/AMEMBASSY BANGKOK 6406
RUEHSH/AMCONSUL SHENYANG 3225
RHMFISS/COMUSKOREA J5 SEOUL KOR
RHHMUNA/CDR USPACOM HONOLULU HI
RHMFISS/COMUSKOREA J2 SEOUL KOR
RHMFISS/COMUSKOREA SCJS SEOUL KOR

UNCLAS SEOUL 004261

SIPDIS

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SENSITIVE

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [PREF](#) [PHUM](#) [PREL](#) [KS](#) [KN](#) [CH](#)

SUBJECT: ROK ACADEMICS OFFER MULTI-DIMENSIONAL APPROACH TO
DPRK HUMAN RIGHTS

11. (SBU) SUMMARY: Several conservative ROK academics urged a multi-pronged approach toward North Korean human rights, arguing that the U.S. should take larger number of refugees, continue sanctions and increase radio broadcasts into North Korea, while providing humanitarian assistance and promoting exchanges with North Korean officials. Such an approach, they reasoned, would get information about the outside world into the closed country while prompting other countries, including the ROK, to do more to help North Korean refugees. This approach would ultimately undermine support for the regime from within, the only way to improve the human rights situation, while insulating against criticism that the U.S. was seeking regime change, they argued. END SUMMARY.

ADMIT MORE NORTH KOREAN REFUGEES...

12. (SBU) In separate conversations with Poloffs in late November and early December, several conservative ROK academics argued that to effectively address the human rights situation in North Korea, the international community needed to take a multi-dimensional approach. Won Jae-chun, human rights law scholar at Handong Global University, assessed that the North Korean refugee issue could play a key role in developing a winning approach to North Korean human rights issues. Won said that the U.S. should take significantly larger numbers of North Korean refugees, and criticized the ROK for not taking a more proactive stance in extending protection to all North Koreans in third countries, which he said it could legally do under its Constitution. Kookmin University North Korea scholar Andrei Lankov similarly criticized the ROK for failing to do more to help North Koreans in third countries.

13. (SBU) Won argued that U.S. admission of significant numbers of North Korean refugees would encourage the ROK to do more and demonstrate that the U.S. is committed to assisting North Koreans in need, not simply using the issue as a political tool against the North Korean regime. At the same time, the U.S. should press European countries to take North Korean refugees from third countries, and put concerted pressure on China to recognize North Koreans as refugees, Won said. Heo Man-ho, a human rights scholar at Kyungpook National University, said that the U.S. is the only country capable of levying sufficient pressure on China to force it to comply with its obligations under the refugee convention.

14. (SBU) To make the most effective argument about the humanitarian nature of its actions, and to assist those in greatest need, Won and Heo emphasized that the U.S. should focus its efforts on helping the most vulnerable groups of refugees, such as children born in China to North Korean mothers and Chinese fathers.

...WHILE INCREASING ENGAGEMENT

15. (SBU) Won stressed that the U.S. should also increase humanitarian assistance to the DPRK and facilitate exchanges with government officials. Contact with North Korean officials was essential to encouraging the DPRK to open and reform. Heo agreed on the importance of exchanges, which was the only way to improve the human rights and humanitarian situation in North Korea and eliminate the root cause of the North Korean refugee problem. The most realistic way to build anti-Kim Jong-il sentiment from within was by exposing North Koreans to information about the outside world. Exchanges involving North Korean officials in the long-run would prepare such officials to oppose the Kim regime, he said. Andrei Lankov similarly encouraged increased exchanges with North Korean officials, stating that change would take quiet, systematic work over time. Providing North Koreans with opportunities to obtain education and other training abroad was a crucial way to effect change. Won noted that inter-Korean projects at Kaesong and Kungang also played an important role in facilitating contact between North Koreans and the outside world, and are setting the foundation for unification. Radio broadcasts into North Korea are also an important mechanism for getting outside information inside the DPRK's borders, according to Won and Lankov.

16. (SBU) While urging increased engagement, Heo praised the imposition of sanctions on North Korea, particularly the ban on luxury goods, as important steps that could help undermine the regime.

17. (SBU) Won argued that increasing engagement with the DPRK and increasing humanitarian assistance, while taking larger numbers of refugees and increasing radio broadcasts, would insulate the U.S. to charges from leftist groups and the ROKG that it was seeking regime change. In practice, however, this approach would quietly undermine the regime by encouraging opening from within and building international consensus around the refugee issue.

BUILDING A MULTILATERAL FRAMEWORK

18. (SBU) Heo asked about the North Korea Human Rights Act's reference to the creation of a Helsinki process to address North Korean human rights. Heo said that there should be a mechanism to resolve human rights issues in Northeast Asia, pointing out that the region lacks the frameworks that exist in other parts of the world. The political will to create such a mechanism in the region and address North Korean human rights depends on North Korea's neighbors, and the U.S. should press those countries to support the creation of such a framework, Heo said.

19. (SBU) Lee Tai-hwan, Sejong Institute Senior Research Fellow and China Study Committee Chairman, assessed that concerted international effort on the DPRK and China would be required to compel improvement in North Korean human rights and the situation of North Korean refugees. International pressure on North Korean human rights and Chinese treatment of North Korean refugees would increase the chance that China would respond, as it would not want to lose face. International pressure would also create more space for the ROKG to take a greater role in these issues. In particular, Lee suggested creating a trilateral consultative framework with U.S., ROK and Chinese academics or NGOs on North Korean refugee issues as an initial step toward shifting the Chinese position.

COMMENT

¶10. (SBU) In the wake of the North Korean nuclear test two months ago, a larger segment of the Korean population is beginning to question the Roh government's engagement policy.

As we head into the 2007 presidential elections, the ideas articulated by these academics -- especially those that link engagement with reciprocity -- will likely gain more traction. END COMMENT.

VERSHBOW